

Summary of evaluation of Humanitarian Settlement Program in Armidale

This summary was compiled in April 2021

Background

The Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) is delivered in the initial stages of settlement to refugees and other humanitarian entrants. SSI is contracted by the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs to deliver the HSP in selected locations across NSW. The HSP is part of a suite of initiatives supporting Australia's Humanitarian Program, which includes pre-arrival orientation and a range of specialised programs post-arrival, including the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), the national Telephone Interpreting Service (TIS) and a network of torture and trauma services in each jurisdiction. These initiatives are complemented by mainstream and specialist services delivered in each jurisdiction and by local government.

In mid-2017, the Australian Government announced Armidale, NSW, as a new designated regional refugee settlement location. At that time, SSI initiated contact with local stakeholders to lay the groundwork for the arrival of refugees, which commenced in early 2018.

In mid-2018, SSI contracted ARTD Consultants to conduct an independent evaluation of SSI's role in the establishment and delivery of the HSP in Armidale. The evaluation, over two years, aimed to build the evidence base relating to SSI's approach and delivery of the HSP in Armidale, and assess settlement outcomes in the initial stages of settlement for refugees over time.

The HSP is typically provided for up to 18 months. On exit from the HSP clients are referred to the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program, also funded by the Department of Home Affairs, which is delivered in the Armidale region by Northern Settlement Services. Refugees with identified complex needs may be eligible for additional case management support, known as Specialised and Intensive Services.

Refugees settling in Armidale are Yazidis or Ezidis who are mainly from parts of Northern Iraq. The Yazidis are a persecuted ethno-religious minority and have experienced significant exposure to conflict, displacement and associated trauma. Yazidis are also being settled in other regional locations in Australia.



Methods

Data for assessing progress in settlement was collected through two waves of telephone surveys in 2019 and 2020 with adult HSP clients in their preferred first language. For the analysis surveys were categorised into: a newly-arrived group (n=64, 6-11 months in Australia) and a longer-resident group (n=54, 12-29 months in Australia) to generate insights into changes over time against key settlement indicators.

The survey was framed to map to the intermediary outcomes of the HSP Outcomes Framework and included questions taken from the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA), a large longitudinal study of refugees. The results from the longer-resident group of Armidale HSP clients (n=54) were compared with BNLA Wave 2 respondents (N=122, 12-23 months in Australia) from other regional locations to give a sense of how Armidale HSP clients were tracking compared to refugees settling in regional Australia. The Department of Home Affairs provided data to the evaluator that 644 Yazidis had settled in Armidale by February 2020 of whom 315 (51%) were adults, which suggests that the two HSP surveys of 118 people reached almost 40 per cent adult refugees. Females comprise a slightly higher (53%) proportion of refugee arrivals to males (47%).

Two waves of interviews with key stakeholders (N=42) from services and agencies with links to the HSP in late 2018 and early 2020 supplemented the survey data.

Demographics

The age and gender distribution of the two categories of Armidale HSP survey respondents and the BNLA comparison group were similar.

Age and gender distribution

HSP 6-11 months (n=64)



HSP 12+ months (n=54)



BNLA Wave 2 (n=122)



18-24yrs
24-44yrs
45-64yrs
65-74yrs
75+yrs

Female
Male



Settlement outcomes

The survey mapped to the Intermediary Outcomes of the HSP across:

- Housing;
- Physical and Mental Health and Wellbeing;
- Managing Money;
- Community Participation and Networking;
- Family Functioning and Social Support;
- Justice;
- Language Services;
- Education and Training; and
- Employment.

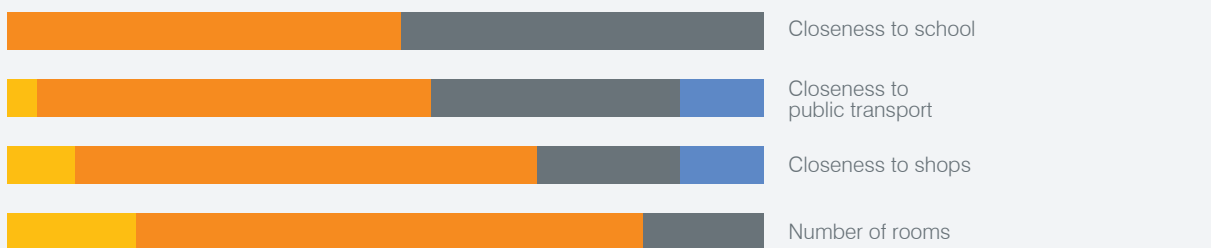
Housing

All surveyed HSP clients (100%) live in private rental accommodation, compared to the 72% of the BNLA Wave 2 respondents, with SSI reported to have secured rental accommodation throughout the community, rather than clustered in one area. Generally, stakeholders felt that this was a good approach as it encourages Yazidis to engage with neighbours and with the general community. The low satisfaction with proximity to public transport is not surprising in a regional location.

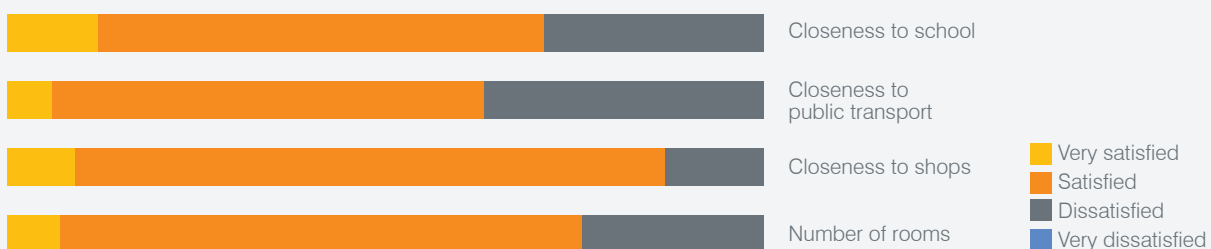
The client survey found that satisfaction with housing increased between newly-arrived and longer-resident refugees across all dimensions, except for a slight decrease in the number of rooms measure. (BNLA Wave 2 data was not available for the housing satisfaction measures.)

Housing satisfaction

HSP 6–11 months



HSP 12+ months



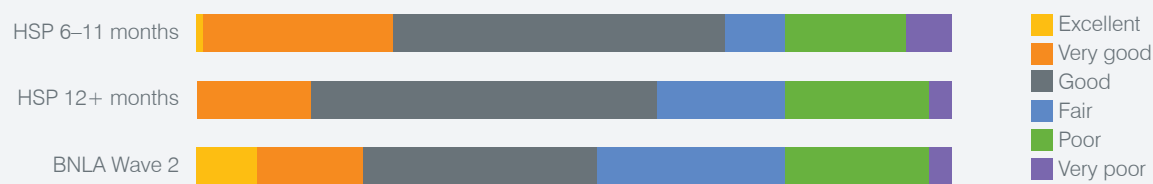
Physical and mental health and wellbeing

Self-reported health among HSP clients indicated a slight drop between newly-arrived and longer-resident clients reporting their health as 'Excellent/Very Good/Good', but this was still higher than in BNLA Wave 2 respondents living in regional area.

Stakeholders reported substantial challenges with access to bulk-billing GPs and access to specialist services, which often necessitated significant travel and overnight accommodation. They also highlighted ongoing challenges with access to interpreters for health care professionals. Stakeholders reported that SSI worked with health providers to facilitate communication and coordination to address these challenges through nurses who work with refugees, the local Primary Health Network and GP practice managers.

The survey included six personal qualities in the form of statements that relate to resilience and mental health: e.g. "I take a positive attitude towards myself", "I can handle whatever comes my way". The longer-resident group were more confident that they could handle whatever comes their way (71%) than the newly-arrived group (61%). However, for the other five measures the newly-arrived group were slightly more positive than the longer-resident group, suggesting that there may be a "honeymoon period" among the newly-arrived group, which becomes tempered with longer residency.

Self reported health for past month



Community participation and networking

Armidale HSP clients reported increased feelings over time of being part of Australian community ('always'/'most of the time'). The longer-resident group reported this at much higher rates than BNLA respondents.

Reported levels of understanding of Australian ways and culture decreased slightly over time among Armidale HSP clients and were mostly in line with BNLA Wave 2 respondents. While building new connections with neighbours was reported as being challenging and only showed slight improvement over time, both newly-arrived and longer-resident Armidale HSP clients reported a very strong sense of being made to feel welcome ('always/most of the time', >90%) in Australia. This is borne out in research monitoring Armidale community attitudes towards refugees which has found high and increasing positive community sentiment over time¹.

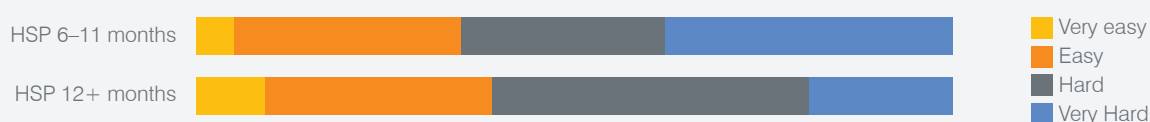
Feeling part of the Australian community



Understand Australian ways



Talk to Australian neighbours



¹ Watt, S., McMahon, T. and Soulos, T., 2019. *Monitoring Community Attitudes During Refugee Resettlement in Armidale NSW*, UNE/SSI.

Family functioning and social support

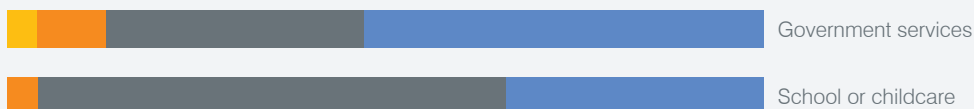
The longer-resident Armidale group reported considerably greater confidence in knowing how to find government services, schools and childcare than did the newly-arrived group. The longer-resident group are more or less on par with BNLA Wave 2 respondents.

The newly-arrived refugees in Armidale reported a higher level of support from their national, ethnic and religious communities, as well as from other community groups. The decline over time among the longer-resident group is still higher than the reported rate of the BNLA respondents.

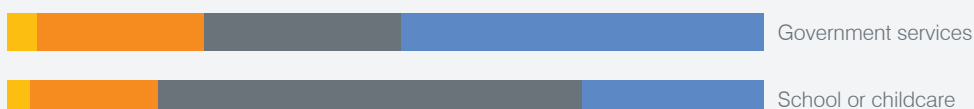
The self-rated overall perception of settlement is becoming easier over time among the Yazidi community but the longer-resident group still rates settlement as being much harder than BNLA Wave 2 respondents settled in other regional areas.

Know how to find ...

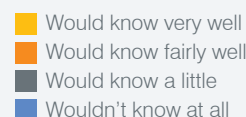
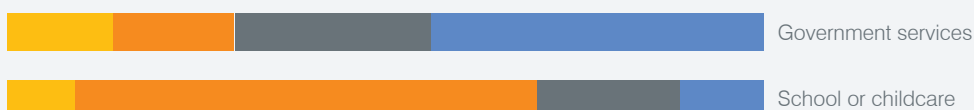
HSP 6–11 months



HSP 12+ months

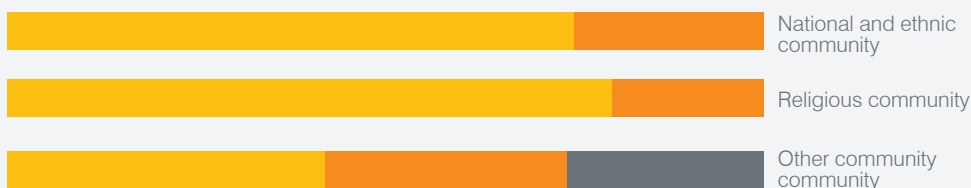


BNLA Wave 2



Support from ...

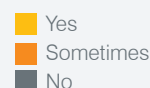
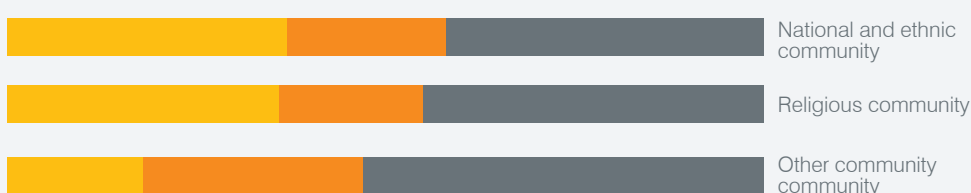
HSP 6–11 months



HSP 12+ months



BNLA Wave 2



Family functioning and social support continued

Overall experience of settlement

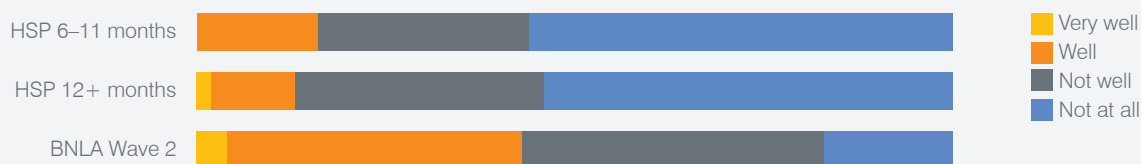


Education and Training and English

Overall, the longer-resident Armidale HSP clients showed a small self-reported improvement in English proficiency ('read/speak/write/understand English', well/very well, in the range of 8-16%). The BNLA Wave 2 data showed far greater self-reported English proficiency (in the range of 35-45%) than the longer-resident Armidale group. Yazidis, as a persecuted minority, have often had limited access to formal education and so are reported to have low literacy levels in their first language. The slow progress in English language proficiency may also reflect challenges with the AMEP, which were highlighted in a recent review of employment and education pathways for refugees (the Shergold² review) and this has prompted changes by the Department of Home Affairs to the AMEP in 2020³).

In terms of other education pathways, stakeholders reported challenges with access to vocational education and training. Local schools have seen high numbers of Yazidi children and young people enrolled. In NSW, Intensive English Centres (IECs) provide specialist education support to assist students with poor English language skills to learn English as part of their school education. A new IEC has been established at an Armidale high school to help meet the demand for this specialised support. School homework centres are also providing intensive English tuition for these students.

Can understand spoken English



Can write English



² Shergold, Benson and Piper, 2019, *Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia: The findings of a Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia*.

³ See: <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/alantudge/Pages/More-class-hours-available-to-help-migrants-learn-English.aspx>

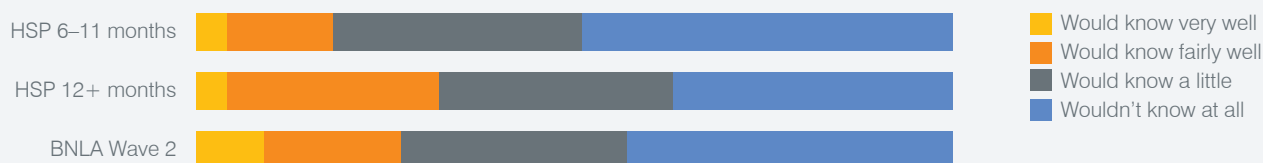
Employment

The Armidale HSP clients showed a strong improvement in knowing how to look for a job over time and the longer-resident Armidale group were slightly stronger than BNLA respondents. When it comes to having ever looked for paid work and self-reported paid work in the past week the Armidale HSP clients showed a small improvement over time, but this was much lower compared to BNLA respondents. It should be noted that in comparison to BNLA respondents settled in other regional areas, Yazidi's who settled in Armidale in 2018 and early 2019 could not rely on the informal support coming from existing Yazidi community networks. Also, a preliminary analysis of Armidale HSP exit-interview data showed that almost a quarter of exited clients are exempted from employment, mostly due to caring for children.

Stakeholders reported that some Yazidis found agricultural work and work in restaurants and commented that jobactive employment support providers have not been effective with refugees (a topic that was extensively canvassed in the Shergold Review⁴ in 2019 as a systemic rather than a local issue). It is also possible that access to farm work may also have been hampered in part due to the drought that lasted until early 2020 in Armidale.

Well those people that have been here a lot longer ... they're starting to see that employment, whatever that comes in, small business, whatever it may be, is the best pathway to independence. They've got the same desires as all of us. (External stakeholder)

Know how to look for a job



Employment



⁴ Shergold et al, 2019.

Stakeholder Feedback

There are several features of SSI's approach to assist in establishing, and delivering, the HSP that were highlighted by stakeholders as contributing to the perceived success of refugee settlement in Armidale: strong formal and informal communication mechanisms with local agencies; initial community education on the role of the HSP and culturally responsive training for service providers; a dedicated focus on community engagement and a strong volunteer program. The core of these is the understanding that it is necessary for the whole community and local service system to support refugee settlement⁵.

The focus on community engagement and the whole of the community was critical in the establishment phase. While there was widespread positive support for refugee settlement, there were also some concerns raised about the impact on the local community, such as perceptions of a loss of jobs and demands on local services. SSI and other stakeholders addressed these perceptions, outlining the potential positive impact on local jobs that new arrivals can have, such as increased numbers of teachers.

I think SSI did it really well. Working with Regional Council was the main thing and with community to address concerns ... They took a really professional approach to answer community questions and voices started to drop down.
(External stakeholder)

Stakeholders reported that SSI has taken a proactive approach to the settlement of refugees in Armidale in ways that promote the strengths and agency of HSP clients. SSI has also sought Yazidi input on what they need to settle long-term in Armidale and they have articulated priorities including: a place where they could gather as a community; a place of worship; and a place for burial according to their customs. SSI has maintained a high level of communication with other agencies and local services to ensure that services offered by all tiers of government and the broader Armidale community are better able to meet the needs and aspirations of refugees in the longer term.

Certainly, seems to be a strengths-focus, rather than looking at deficits and what refugees don't have and how they can fix the problems they have. They're looking at their hopes, dreams, assets and building on that, empowering them to build on strengths.
(External stakeholder)

Challenges

Several challenges were identified during the evaluation, including social infrastructure in regional areas (e.g. GPs); difficulties accessing Kurdish/Kurmanji interpreters; and English language skills and learning and pathways to vocational education and employment.

Some stakeholders were critical of the level of support offered to HSP clients and what they saw as limited access by Armidale clients to the Specialised and Intensive Support program (a higher tier of support that requires Department of Home Affairs approval), arguing that, given the high level of need of the Yazidis and the social infrastructure gaps in regional areas, a higher level of support is warranted.

I think there has not been recognition about level of complexity of this cohort. And therefore, perhaps that they need more than what was anticipated and funded in terms of support.
(External stakeholder)

The challenges posed by gaps in local infrastructure and services are not the responsibility of a single organisation nor of a single program. They require collaborative and innovative solutions. Ideally, any solutions found will bring benefit to the whole Armidale community, not only refugees. In addition, some of these challenges (e.g. access to interpreters) may ease over time.

⁵ SSI, 2019, *All in for Armidale: A whole of community approach to Ezidi settlement in Armidale*.

Areas of improvement

Additional elements delivered by SSI to complement the HSP should be acknowledged as essential components of the HSP in regional areas, including community engagement, community education and capacity building on how to work with refugees, and communication and coordination with local services on specific projects.

The evaluation indicated a need to improve approaches for learning English. (Since the evaluation was completed, the Australian Government introduced a raft of changes in 2020 to the AMEP, which are now being implemented⁶.)

Stakeholder feedback argued that the HSP is under-resourced, particularly for a regional area with limited social infrastructure and a cohort of refugees with high support/complex needs.

Given the critical need for refugees to access GPs and interpreters, the evaluation recommended better planning by the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Health and Ageing around having sufficient capacity of bulk-billing GPs and sufficient capacity of TIS interpreters as part of regional refugee settlement.

Conclusion

Overall, the establishment and delivery of the HSP was evaluated as being sound in the new settlement location of Armidale. At this early stage, there were mixed results in terms of outcomes between newly-arrived and longer-resident HSP clients with most indicators showing improvement or remaining stable, and a small decrease in health and wellbeing attributes.

Compared to refugees settling in other regional areas, the longer-resident Armidale group was stronger in terms of community participation and networking, family functioning and social support, and lower on English proficiency and employment measures. Stakeholders were generally favourable about SSI's approach to service delivery, including strong collaboration with local services, dedicated community engagement initiatives, the volunteer program and the focus on involving the Yazidi community and working with their strengths.

REFERENCE

ARTD Consultants. (2021). *Evaluation of the Humanitarian Settlement Program in Armidale*.

⁶ See: <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/alantudge/Pages/More-class-hours-available-to-help-migrants-learn-English.aspx>